

Martz makes Superfund request official

Montana Gov. Judy Martz officially asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to add Libby to the list of the nation's most-contaminated cleanup sites, saying the area is the state's highest environmental priority because of asbestos contamination.

"The Libby Asbestos Site presents the greatest danger to public health or welfare or the environment of the known Superfund facilities in Montana," Mrs. Martz wrote in a letter sent Jan. 14 to the EPA regional office in Denver.

In her letter, Mrs. Martz notes the connection between widespread illness and death in Libby to the former vermiculite mining operations of W.R. Grace & Co., from the mine's 70-year-long release of toxic asbestos into the area.

"I am hereby designating the site as the highest priority release site in Montana and request that

the site be placed on the National Priorities List as soon as possible," Mrs. Martz wrote.

The letter followed up Mrs. Martz's Dec. 20 announcement to Libby residents that she would fire Montana's lone "silver bullet" with the EPA for an accelerated Superfund listing process to cleanup asbestos in the area. Her surprise decision to use the state's lone fast-track authority came after months of debate over the issue.

In August, 2001, Martz visited Libby and criticized the Superfund program, saying she thought W.R. Grace & Co. ought to be given a chance to clean up the contamination. Many critics — including state Attorney General Mike McGrath — said that would not be possible because Grace declared bankruptcy in July.

Then in a meeting last fall with the Lincoln County Commission,



Montanian file photo

Gov. Judy Martz

the governor refused to even talk about the "silver bullet" option, saying she feared a terrorist attack on Montana could create an envi-

ronmental catastrophe greater than Libby's.

But in the end, Mrs. Martz acknowledged that asbestos contamination in the Libby area is Montana's worst environmental problem and requires quick remedy. The EPA has been working in Libby to remove the contamination for nearly two years, since national news stories linked at least 88 deaths to the mine. In the first two years, the EPA has spent approximately \$32 million testing areas and removing contaminated soils and mine wastes that present health risks.

EPA officials have pushed for a Superfund listing to guarantee long-term cleanup. Mrs. Martz's letter begins the listing process, which will take several more months.

In the meantime, the governor is

asking the EPA to continue its ongoing work in Libby. Among her other conditions, Mrs. Martz is asking federal officials to employ local workers as much as possible, hold innocent homeowners and business harmless for cleanup costs, and make sure the cleanup is speedy.

"I am particularly concerned about the amount of time Superfund takes and any perceived stigma potentially affecting real estate and financial transactions as a result of NPL listing," wrote Mrs. Martz.

The EPA has already agreed to Mrs. Martz's conditions. Officials have said they believe cleanup of the town will take two years, with another year of follow-up testing. Maintenance of the mine site will likely be ongoing.

MONTANIAN

JAN 23, 2002

SDMS Document ID
2032310